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Is China Repressing or Moulding Religion? ‘Religious Freedom’, Post-coloniality, and the Chinese State Building

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on three conceptual lenses through which a better understanding of the politics of religion in contemporary China is expected to obtain. On the basis of a genealogical and discursive analysis of ‘religious freedom’ as a paradoxical concept and institution, and by identifying the ‘post-colonial’ condition of contemporary China, this article argues for a non-dichotomous understanding of the Chinese and Western political approaches to religion and religious freedom and attempts to further locate the real logic of the Chinese politics of religion in the Chinese Communist Party’s agenda for the ‘Chinese state building’. Four interrelated factors, i.e. China’s economic development, the Chinese nationalism, the authority of the Chinese Communist Party, and international relations and global competition, that are especially important for the Party and governments at all levels in their setting and implementing of policies on religion are considered, in order to provide an explication of the dynamic, multiple forms of negotiation between modern secular politics and its ‘heterodoxies’ that define the politics of religion in mainland China.

Introduction

While ‘religion in China (People’s Republic)’ has always been an intriguing topic for Western population, raising is now more concerns regarding the religious policies adopted and implemented by the Chinese government representing the will of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). This can be seen in the mushrooming of all kinds of reports and documents from media, Western governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) regarding ‘religion in China’. Though having their respective focuses, these reports and documents, when explaining whatever facts identified about the regulations on religion in China, with few exceptions, resort to ‘religious freedom’ as both a universally accepted human right and a widely practiced legal and political institution, at least in the West.¹ In this way, the reality of religious practice in China

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¹See for example Lindsay Maizland, ‘China’s Repression of Uyghurs in Xinjiang’, Council on Foreign Relations (2021), <https://www.cfr.org/backgroundunder/chinas-repression-uyghurs-xinjiang> (accessed 15 October 2021); Office of International Religious Freedom of the U.S. Department of State, *2019 Report on International Religious Freedom: China*

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is either seen as repressing religious freedom or being provided with adequate religious freedom, or somewhere in between, although in most cases it is the former reading that manifests itself more prominently.

Most of these reports and documents are important and can be justified in terms of both their exploration of what is happening in China and the ethical concerns involved. However, does this mean that ‘religious freedom’ should be the only legitimate conceptual and institutional lens through which we are able to observe, and more importantly, understand the politics of religion in China? To this question this article proposes an alternative answer. It maintains, and makes an attempt to argue, that ‘religious freedom’, as both a concept and an institution built upon the modern category of ‘religion’, is not adequate for fully grasping how different practices and institutions (not recognized as ‘religious’ negotiate with the Chinese state today.

The juxtaposed ‘repressing’ and ‘moulding’ in the title, rather than implying two different degrees of religious freedom and asking for factual rectification in addressing ‘religion in China’, refer to two different ways for understanding whatever is happening to the interactions between ‘religion’ and the Chinese state: one (repressing) based on ‘religious freedom’ as an self-evident, universal human right that in fact has its root in the modern categorical distinction between ‘religion’ and the ‘secular’, and the other (moulding) approaching to the practices and institutions in the tension between their constantly being categorized and institutionalized as (not) ‘religion’ and their actual inseparability from those spheres of human enterprise generally considered as ‘secular’ such as politics, economy, and nationalism. While both ways have their validity within certain interpretive frameworks, through deconstructing the modern invention of ‘religion’ and ‘religious freedom’ and approaching to ‘religion’ in its inseparability from the aforementioned spheres, this article tries to prove that the latter could be more adequate for understanding the so-called ‘religious condition’ in China without negating the ‘repressing’ facts.

Along with ‘religious freedom’, to achieve this goal two other conceptual axes are chosen, around which a renewed understanding of the politics of religion in contemporary China is expected to obtain. Each of the following three sections is titled and thus deals with one of the three inter-connected concepts: ‘religious freedom’, ‘post-coloniality’, and the ‘Chinese state building’. Section one provides a genealogical and discursive analysis of ‘religious freedom’ as an intrinsically paradoxical concept and institution that can be historicized, politicized and relativized, on the basis of a critical examination of ‘religion’ as a modern category in its relation and opposition to the ‘secular’ and ‘politics’. By identifying a postcolonial condition in contemporary China, the second section firstly argues for a non-dichotomous understanding of the Chinese and Western political approaches to ‘religion’ and ‘religious freedom’, and touches upon, though slightly, the political agenda behind the Western ‘no religious freedom in China’ discourse in a post-colonial context. Built upon these discussions, the final section attempts to go beyond the interpretive framework of ‘religious freedom’ and locate the real logic of

(Includes Tibet, Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and Macau), U.S. Department of State Website (2019), <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/china/> (accessed 15 October, 2021); Ewelina U. Ochab, ‘Is China Conducting A Crackdown on Religion?’ Forbes (2019), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ewelinaochab/2019/04/20/is-china-conducting-a-crackdown-on-religion/?sh=70e5cd5c19d3> (accessed 15 October 2021); to name a typical few.

the Chinese politics of religion in ‘moulding’ rather than ‘repressing’ in accordance with the political agenda of China as a secular nation-state with rising nationalism.

It is worth addressing a few methodological issues before proceeding, among which the use of the term ‘politics’ in this article should be explained in the first place. The term ‘politics’ when used in my discussion, as in ‘the politics of religion in China’, by no means refers to a purely ‘non-religious’ or ‘secular’ domain of human life that is built exclusively upon science and rationality and thus can be differentiated from ‘religion’. As will be explained below, ‘politics’ understood in the above sense is no more than one of the symbiotic categories with ‘religion’ and thus another modern construct as well as ‘religion’, having been used more in a rhetoric than substantial way in order to differentiate itself from ‘religion’ and self-identify as a ‘non-religious’ sphere. Distancing itself from such a usage, ‘politics’ or ‘political’ in this article refers to institutions and activities in which structural power is used to organize a society or community of people.² Not only in no way can it be clearly differentiated from ‘religion’, but the deep and complex involvement of the latter in politics is key for us to appreciate the inadequacy of ‘religious freedom’ as an epistemological tool in grasping the contemporary reality of ‘religion’, whether in China or in the West.

What needs to be dealt with includes also a potential concern among my readers regarding the ethical stance of the author. As an investigation into contemporary Chinese politics of religion, this article aims to provide a renewed theoretical framework for understanding ‘religion in China’, rather than to construct a moral justification for the Chinese Communist Party’s policies on religion. Its interest is more a critically hermeneutic one than an ideological one; it asks for better understanding but not appreciation. While it contains in itself critical reflection on a certain form of Western discourse, this should not be seen as politically taking side. What is urgently needed, I believe, is neither ethical indifference nor throwing oneself into the emerging ideological war, but to go beyond the dualistic picture between China and the West in terms of ‘religious freedom’ and reinstate ‘religion’ from an autonomous, isolable entity to its emptiness in substance and unboundedness in nature, manifesting itself in nothing more than a web of interdependent types of human experience. As you will see, it is precisely the rising dualistic picture of the political landscape of today’s world—authoritarian China at one pole and democratic West at the other—that this article hopes to help deconstruct by focusing on ‘religion’. When Western media is increasingly keen on creating a new ‘other’ (after the erotic ‘Orient’, totalitarian Soviet Union and terrorist ‘Muslims’), this article on the contrary attempts to show, by relating ‘religion’ as a universally accepted category to modern politics and colonialism in the Chinese context, that modernity requires an even more holistic understanding beyond the apparent thesis of globalization.

‘Religion’ and the paradoxical ‘religious freedom’

It is not unhelpful to make explicit my conclusion about ‘religious freedom’ as a modern ideal at the beginning of this section: it is one that is built upon a paradox and thus inadequate, if not misleading, when one tries to grasp the reality around ‘religion’ not

²Peter Scott and William T. Cavanaugh, ‘Introduction’ in William T. Cavanaugh and Peter Scott (eds) *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology* (Malden, MA; Oxford: Blackwell Pub., 2014), pp. 1–4, at p.1.

only in China in specific but in the modern world in general. To understand the paradoxical nature of 'religious freedom', however, a critical examination of 'religion' as a modern category is entailed, as 'religious' here is not merely an attributive indicating a possessive relation, but what defines the nature of this particular type of freedom. 'Religion' necessitates its 'freedom', and the latter in turn demonstrates the former. By 'necessitates', I mean that 'religious freedom' is an integral part of the conceptualization and institutionalization of 'religion' in modern society. 'Religion' necessarily manifests itself in 'religious freedom' while the latter is at its core a modern form of discipline and has been, along with the former, constantly in making by modern government in association with particular political agendas. As will be seen, this critical examination of 'religion' is what differentiates this investigation from most academic discussions of 'religious freedom' that are based on uncritical acceptance of the category of 'religion' and 'religious freedom' as a logical concomitant of the former (though with different understandings of what 'religious freedom' should look like, an issue which will be dealt with below).

Critical Religion scholars such as Timothy Fitzgerald, Russell T. McCutcheon and Talal Asad have pointed out in persuasive ways the inventive and problematic nature of the modern category of 'religion' in its symbiotic relation to secularity and modern politics.³ 'Religion', simply put, is what modernity invents (and what helps produce modernity as well) in order to set up an apparently autonomous sphere for human institutions and practices, rendering them irrelevant to, and inconsistent with, modern governance and sovereignty, as these are institutions and practices that not only are modern governance and sovereignty unable to fully control, but they have to rely on, from time to time, to help realize their agenda. As a category, 'religion' is too unstable and unbounded to be something distinct enough among all kinds of the human experience so that people can arrive an agreement about what counts (not) religion in reality, not to mention clearly differentiating it from other spheres of human enterprise.

This post-structuralist analysis of the category of 'religion' in its relation to modern governance and sovereignty is expressed no clearer than in the introductory chapter Trevor Stack drafts for *Religion as a Category of Governance and Sovereignty*. What is of great importance in his discussion for our understanding of 'religious freedom' can be seen in his following exposition of the relationship between 'religion' and modern governments, which is worth being cited at length:

Governments used 'religion' to set in relief their own sovereignty. They appeared to concede sovereignty by acknowledging a degree of autonomy within the 'religious' sphere ... However, governments in fact defined their sovereignty in opposition to 'religion' ... Not only did they mark off 'religion' from the domain of 'politics' which they claimed for themselves, they claimed the authority to determine the bounds of 'religion.' Government was to decide what organizations are and are not to be considered 'religious'— for example, Scientology is considered a religion in the United States but not in Britain. Government was also to determine who can do what within and beyond the 'religious' domain—for example, whether one can wear 'religious' symbols at school or give 'religious' grounds in the

³Timothy Fitzgerald, 'A Critique of "Religion" as a Cross-cultural Category', *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, 9:2 (1997), pp. 91–110; *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); *Discourse on Civility and Barbarity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). Russell T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, and Modernity* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2003).

public sphere. In practice, such issues were and are resolved through ever-shifting struggles between a variety of government and non-government institutions and organizations. But modern government has claimed the last word in authorizing as ‘religious’ all those practices and institutions that they are unable to control directly. Thus, it has appeared to concede sovereignty but in fact performs it by setting the parameters of what is admissible as ‘religion’.⁴

It is this ‘a degree of autonomy within the “religious” sphere’ that defines ‘religious freedom’. However, it is a form of autonomy whose boundaries are defined by modern politics (neither as a sphere nor a concept that can be analytically differentiated from religion) in the first place. Many traditions that are entitled to belong to this ‘religious’ sphere and to ‘enjoy’ therefore ‘religious freedom’, such as Christianity, Islam, and Confucianism (which is a more complex case though), had once not only been inseparable from, but actually encompassed and permeated politics, along with other spheres of human enterprise understood as secular and thus separated from religion today, such as economy, medicine, law, war, agriculture, and even science. However, the premodern inclusion of all of these spheres in a ‘religious’ tradition has been seen by both modern intellectual and political discourses as simultaneously contingent and problematic.⁵ In that sense, the modern categorization and institutionalization of religion, separating it from those spheres that had been ‘trespassed’ by it, is merely a proper reset of religion: rendering ‘to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s’ (Matthew 22:21). Among ‘world religions’, Islam and Christianity are obviously two traditions that have gone through this process, with the latter today having accepted the aforementioned separation more willingly than the former. The history of minor traditions’ hesitation and even refusal to accept this separation, such as that of the tradition of Pueblo Indians of New Mexico in the late 19th and early 20th centuries,⁶ has also proved the universality of this process.

‘Religion’, therefore, presupposes a historical retreat of the premodern traditions from the aforementioned spheres, first and foremost politics, and the reduction of them to ‘religion’, a distinct and at the same time private and spiritual sphere that cares only one’s salvation, private morality, afterlife, or liberation from suffering. In other words, ‘religion’ has been made as the remainder of modern politics and is something that is still in making according to the constantly changing needs of ‘secular’ politics. That the distinctiveness of ‘religion’ as something timeless and self-evident from other spheres is essentially a form of reduction can be seen, for example, in the statement by Religious Freedom Institute, a non-governmental organization ‘committed to achieving broad acceptance of religious liberty’, when explaining its mission: ‘Religious freedom is important for everyone, everywhere. Why? Because *religion* is important for everyone, everywhere. Human beings are innately religious’ (italic in the original).⁷

In fact, the focus of ‘religious freedom’, from its outset, lies in separating those premodern traditions from politics, or more accurately, in liberating modern politics from the

⁴Trevor Stack, ‘Introduction’ in Trevor Stack, Naomi R. Goldenberg, and Timothy Fitzgerald (eds) *Religion as a Category of Governance and Sovereignty* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2004), pp. 1–20, at p. 8.

⁵Fitzgerald, *Discourse on Civility and Barbarity*, op. cit., pp. 14, 23, & 53.

⁶Tisa Wenger, “‘A New Form of Government’: Religious-Secular Distinctions in Pueblo Indian History’ in *Religion as a Category of Governance and Sovereignty*, op. cit., pp. 68–89.

⁷Thomas Farr, ‘What in the World is Religious Freedom?’ Religious Freedom Institute website (2019), <https://www.religiousfreedominstitute.org/blog/what-in-the-world-is-religious-freedom> (accessed 15 October 2021).

shackles of the ‘religious’ traditions. When Thomas Jefferson has always been considered as the founder of American religious freedom, whose understandings of it laid down the foundation for the Religion Clauses in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, John Ragosta’s investigation on his legacy for religious freedom makes clear that for Jefferson, religion concerns firstly private morality and thus should be separated from politics.⁸ In fact, Jefferson defines religion and politics as not only inherently irrelevant to each other but claims that any form of alliance between them would simply lead to abuse of power and hostile to liberty, and thus should not be tolerated.⁹ By rejecting any governmental establishment of religion, it is rather obvious that ‘religious freedom’, whether in Jefferson’s personal works or in the First Amendment, was designed firstly as a negative strategy, aiming at confining the activities of individual traditions within a certain sphere, although the freedom to act within that sphere is universally granted to all traditions that are recognized as ‘religions’, as prescribed by the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment.

This understanding brings us to another paradoxical aspect of ‘religious freedom’: to enjoy this ‘freedom’, any practice or institution must firstly be granted the ‘religion’ status. Here again, ‘religion’ as an artificial, unsubstantial category manifests itself. While in academia, scholars have never arrived at an agreement about the definition of ‘religion’,¹⁰ this does not prevent the government from having the final say on what counts or not a religion judicially.¹¹ This governmental authority especially applies to those practices and institutions which do not belong to ‘world religions’—a sub-category under ‘religion’ that was invented to refer to those most internationally widespread ‘religious’ movements. Many studies have proved that governmental exertion of judicial authority on including/excluding a practice or institution into/from ‘religion’ can be found not only in those countries which are considered lacking religious freedom, such as the PRC when it excluded Falun Gong from ‘religion’,¹² but also in those which are usually considered having adequate religious freedom,¹³ and that crucial for a practice or institution to fall within the scope of constitution protection of religious freedom is whether it be recognized as religious in the first place.¹⁴ The fluid and elusive essence of ‘religion’ fundamentally plays the devil with ‘religious freedom’, building the right precariously upon

⁸John Ragosta, *Religious Freedom: Jefferson's Legacy, America's Creed* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2013).

⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 20, 30, 34–36.

¹⁰Russell T. McCutcheon, *Studying Religion: An Introduction* (London; Oakville, CT: Equinox Pub., 2007); Jonathan Z. Smith, ‘Religion, Religions, Religious’ in Jonathan Z. Smith (ed) *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), pp. 179–196.

¹¹Stack, ‘Introduction’ in *Religion as a Category of Governance and Sovereignty*, op. cit., p. 8.

¹²Thomas David DuBois, ‘Religion and the Chinese State: Three Crises and a Solution’, *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 64:3 (2010), pp. 344–358.

¹³Suzanne Owen and Teemu Taira, ‘The Category of “Religion” in Public Classification: Charity Registration of The Druid Network in England and Wales’ in *Religion as a Category of Governance and Sovereignty*, op. cit., pp. 90–114; Russell Sandberg, ‘Clarifying the Definition of Religion Under English Law: The Need for a Universal Definition’, *Ecclesiastical Law Journal*, Cambridge University Press, 20:2 (2018), pp. 132–157; Jaelyn L. Neo, ‘Definitional Imbroglis: A Critique of the Definition of Religion and Essential Practice Tests in Religious Freedom Adjudication’, *International Journal of Constitutional Law*, 16:2 (2018), pp. 574–595.

¹⁴Radley Henrico, ‘Understanding the Concept of Religion within the Constitutional Guarantee of Religious Freedom’, *Journal of South African Law*, 2015:4 (2015), pp. 784–803; C. Miller, ‘“Spiritual but Not Religious”: Rethinking the Legal Definition of Religion’, *Virginia Law Review*, 102:3 (2016), pp. 833–894; Sarah Lubin, ‘Defining Religion under the First Amendment: An argument for Anchoring Definition in Injury’, *Southern California Review of Law and Social Justice*, 28:1 (2019), pp. 107–136; Hugh McFaul, ‘Pushing the Boundaries: Legal Approaches to the Definition of Religion’, *Implicit Religion*, 21:3 (2018), pp. 223–238.

contingent negotiations of ‘what religion is’, as Winnifred Sullivan elaborately exemplifies in her case study on the late 1990s trial of Warner vs. Boca Raton in Florida, America.¹⁵

As ‘religion’ is differentiated from ‘politics’ to support the validity of the latter, some other categories are further differentiated from ‘religion’ to help facilitate the not-taken-for-granted ‘religion’ status. These categories, while may imply various legal status, are usually considered inferior to ‘religion’, such as ‘witchcraft’, ‘cult’, ‘superstitious’, or ‘*xiejiao*’ (邪教 heterodox or evil cult) in China, etc. With this further differentiation, on the one hand, ‘religion’ as a category is further substantiated, representing itself as something real and bounded, and so is ‘religious freedom’. On the other hand, this means the status of ‘religion’ becomes something that all of the practices and institutions who expect to enjoy religious freedom, whether they have been recognized as religions or not, must always devote themselves to preserve or pursue, by adapting themselves to the definition for ‘religion’ approved by jurisdiction.¹⁶

Based on the above discussion about ‘religion’, it is not difficult to identify what ‘religious freedom’ is really about: (re)constructing individual traditions, some of which had been encompassing or/and absolutist systems, into relative and competitive ‘religions’ for winning individual soul. It is, therefore, a paradox in the sense that although it is called a form of freedom, for those traditions to which it has been granted, it is essentially another form of modern discipline, based on a series of modern discourses about religion, secular, science, reason, politics, economics and the state, etc. That said, looking more carefully into this ‘freedom’ itself can help us identify further the paradoxical nature of ‘religious freedom’.

First of all, religious freedom, like most forms of freedom advocated by neo-liberalism, is at best a negative liberty, concerning firstly being free from interference by others. The ‘others’ here may refer to agents representing both the state and other ‘religions’, or any form of alliance between these two. In alignment with Thomas Jefferson’s understanding of religious freedom, the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution considers the latter as essentially an expression of the individual’s freedom of conscience.¹⁷ This is also confirmed by both the U.K. Human Rights Act 1998 (Article 9)¹⁸ and the statements on religious freedom (Article 18) in the U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights,¹⁹ where religious freedom, as correctly pointed out by Roger Finke and Robert R. Martin, ‘can be viewed as a more specific example of the freedom of opinion and expression stated in Article 19’.²⁰ In all of these essential documents defining religious

¹⁵Winnifred F. Sullivan, *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

¹⁶This does not mean all of these institutions and practices always unconditionally accept what modern government conceptualises and institutionalises for ‘religion’. There is indeed resistance from some of them, such as in the case of Falun Gong in China, against the classification imposed by government. However, this resistance cannot change the fact that, generally speaking, it is the modern state who, at least within its territory, has the ultimate authority regarding ‘religion’.

¹⁷The U.S. Constitution First Amendment (1791), <https://constitution.congress.gov/browse/amendment-1/> (accessed 03 August 2021).

¹⁸U.K. Human Rights Act 1998, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/42/contents> (accessed 03 August 2021).

¹⁹United Nations, Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights> (accessed 03 August 2021).

²⁰Roger Finke and Robert R. Martin, ‘Ensuring Liberties: Understanding State Restrictions on Religious Freedoms’, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 53: 4 (2014), pp. 687–705, at pp. 688–698.

freedom, it is understood as more about the inner state of mind of individuals than outer actions of a community.

This form of understanding of religious freedom is greatly different from the Christian freedom,²¹ the Islamic *istiṭā'a* (the power to act),²² or the Confucian *ze* (择 choosing),²³ all of which concern not only being free of interference or external restraint negatively, but contain in itself the idea of possessing and wielding power in order to realize, in a positive way, a certain telos.²⁴ 'Religious' truth for these traditions was not only realized on the level of one's mind or inner conscience, or in one's worship, but also experienced in social, political and economic institutions; power, discipline (including even the form of coercion) and a divine government which instated a certain kind of order (*oikonomia*) was not incompatible with freedom.²⁵ In contrast, religious freedom can only be practiced on the premise that none of the above three traditions, for example, is able to play a role in society in a way that is even approximated to that in which it had done before (modernity); contrasting to Martin Luther's 'freedom of a Christian', the religious freedom a Christian or a church enjoys today is a greatly shrunk one, if not essentially different from the former.

In fact, even this shrunk, negative liberty is far from a clearly defined one; its boundaries vary in different modern states, being made in accordance with the specific political agenda each state pursues. While many have made worthy intellectual attempts at identifying a principle that is supposed to reconcile religious conduct and those key liberal commitments in other areas, these different attempts as such imply that there is hardly any principle with which everyone agrees.²⁶ More than that, this intellectual disagreement can be seen as a reflection of the disagreement over the boundaries for religious freedom in political reality. Although in her recent book Erica Howard argues against the bans in the wearing of religious symbols in Europe, what is more notable in her discussion is nevertheless the dispute around these bans itself, implying in an indisputable way the indeterminacy of the boundaries of religious freedom in today's world.²⁷ Similarly, although the message Brian J. Grim and Roger Finke, when indicating that 86 percent of all nations have laws restricting religious practice, try to convey is that religious freedom are frequently denied, the logic they fail to identify is that what this figure actually betrays may be less the universal infringement of religious freedom than the fact that there is no agreement at all about what constitutes religious freedom in most

²¹Nico Vorster, 'The Concept of Freedom Christianity' in Georges Tamer and Männle Ursula (eds) *The Concept of Freedom in Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), pp. 45–100.

²²Maha El. Kaisy-Friemuth, 'The Concept of Freedom in Islam', in *The Concept of Freedom in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, op. cit., pp. 101–146.

²³Myeong-seok Kim, 'Choice, Freedom, and Responsibility in Ancient Chinese Confucianism', *Philosophy East and West*, 63:1 (2013), pp. 17–38; Chenyang Li, 'The Confucian Conception of Freedom', *Philosophy East and West*, 64:4 (2013), pp. 902–919.

²⁴Neither *istiṭā'a* in Arabic nor 择 in Chinese is an exact lexical equivalence of the English term 'freedom,' a fact that helps demonstrate the imposing nature of 'religious freedom' on non-Christian traditions and that of the category of 'religion' on them.

²⁵Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), pp. 27–54; Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2011).

²⁶Alan Patten, 'The Normative Logic of Religious Liberty', *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 25 (2017), pp. 129–154; Michael W. McConnell, 'Religious Freedom at a Crossroads', *The University of Chicago Law Review*, 59:1 (1992), pp. 115–194; Christopher L. Eisgruber and Lawrence G. Sager, *Religious Freedom and the Constitution* (Harvard University Press, 2007).

²⁷Erica Howard, *Law and the Wearing of Religious Symbols in Europe* (2nd ed.) (London: Routledge, 2020).

countries and thus it has to be defined by jurisdiction.²⁸ James T. Richardson and others readily refer to the management and regulation of religion in religiously pluralistic societies as placing limits on religious freedom.²⁹ Based on what discussed above, however, it is less that these measures lead to suppression of religious freedom than that religious freedom as such and its fluid boundaries entail these measures.

The discussion above suggests that both ‘religious freedom’ as a universally accepted human right and institution as such, as well as its various forms of expression, that is, various political projects of ‘religious freedom’ in the world, must be grasped as anything but absolute, timeless, and self-evident. The opposite of ‘religious freedom’ lies in not the deprivation of it or ‘repressing religious freedom’, but the dissolution of ‘religion’ as a category itself. This relativized, historicized and politicized ‘religious freedom’ finds its contemporary dominant expression, as acutely discerned and profoundly analysed by Elizabeth Shakman Hurd in her *Beyond Religious Freedom*, in a powerful discourse advocated by North American and European international public policy circles over the past two decades, in which not only becomes ‘religion’ a new focus of international law and international public policy, but ‘moderate religion’ as a specific form of religiosity is advocated.³⁰ By using the term ‘operationalize’, Hurd sees the promotion of religious freedom, interfaith understanding, toleration, and rights as particularly constructed for facilitating certain social and political agendas. From this it is obvious that the real logic of any political project about ‘religion’, the one adopted by the CCP included, must be located in its historical, social and political context, rather than simply contrasting it with some dominant narrative of ‘religious freedom’.

Post-colonial condition of China

With all of this discussion regarding ‘religious freedom’ in mind, it is clear that both ‘religion’ and ‘religious freedom’ are particular products of modernity. The establishment of ‘religious freedom’ as a ‘universal’ and ‘absolute’ human right and institution, due to its being an integral part of the agenda of modern ‘secular’ politics, liberal democracy and global capitalism, should not be understood as only for freeing and protecting but also disciplining and shaping. Through establishing and facilitating ‘religious freedom’, not only practices and institutions that have been granted with the status of ‘religion’ but all of those that are considered as inconsistent with modern ‘secular’ sovereignty and governance are now difficult to be seen as legitimate participants of politics; wherever ‘religion’ involves itself, though especially in incidents, conflicts and governmental regulations, the broader social, political and economic contexts in which these emerge are easily ignored and reduced to either ‘religious’ cause or targeting ‘religion’. This is one

²⁸Brian J. Grim and Roger Finke, ‘International Religion Indexes: Government Regulation, Government Favoritism, and Social Regulation of Religion’, *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion*, 2, Article 1 (2006), pp. 1–40.

²⁹James T. Richardson, *Regulating Religion: Case Studies from around the Globe* (New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, 2004); James T. Richardson, ‘Managing Religion and the Judicialization of Religious Freedom’, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 54:1 (2015), pp. 1–19; James A. Beckford, ‘States, Governments, and the Management of Controversial Religious Movements’ in Eileen Barker, James Beckford and Karel Dobbelaere (eds) *Secularization, Nationalism, and Sectarianism: Essays in Honour of Bryan R. Wilson* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp. 125–144; Catharine Cookson, *Regulating Religion: The Courts and the Free Exercise Clause* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

³⁰Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, *Beyond Religious Freedom* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015).

of the universal conditions of modernity, identifiable in all countries that have accepted the binary distinction between ‘religion’ and the ‘secular’ and excluded the former from the territory of ‘politics’, including both communist China and the liberal, democratic Western countries who are accusing China of lacking religious freedom.

This brings my discussion to the second conceptual axis crucial for understanding the politics of religion in the PRC: post-coloniality. Yoshiko Ashiwa and David L. Wank have indicated the problem of adopting a dualistic framework between the liberal, democratic West and the communist China when approaching to state and religion in China.³¹ Meyfair Mei-hui Yang explicates this problem even better with a postcolonial theoretical framework. By emphasizing the ‘colonisation of consciousness’ in China, that is, the radical transformation of the worldview among Chinese elite and official classes made possible by Western colonialism and its discourses, as well as the following institutionalization of this new worldview by Chinese elite themselves, Yang explains how a whole set of Enlightenment projects, including the introduction of ‘religion’ in its binary distinction from the ‘secular’, has been actively embraced and put into practice by China’s modern intelligentsia and political elite since the end of the 19th century.³² Although the Chinese Communist Revolution in 1949 can be seen as a radical break from the Western, liberal model of the Enlightenment, the whole agenda of modernization in communist China has been built completely, though also selectively, upon the ideals and narratives born out of the Enlightenment such as progress, science, liberation, a linear history, nationalism, and, of course, secularism and its separation of ‘religion’ from ‘politics’, including the category of ‘religion’ itself. Marxism and its historical materialism should by no means be seen as non-Western or anti-Enlightenment, and in this sense are also a modern ideology.

It can be said that both the dominating ideology (officially defined as ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’) and the developmental mode of today’s China are still built upon these modern ideals and narratives. In that sense, contemporary China’s basic condition is a postcolonial one, as it was the uncritical absorption of Western colonial discourses by Chinese elite (including both the Nationalists and the Communists) in the semi-colonial era (1840–1949) that laid down the ideological, discursive and institutional foundations for the modern, secular, and nationalist Chinese state.³³ It is true that China’s version of secularism had indeed been much more radical than that in most Western countries during the Maoist era (1949–78), especially during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), due to its Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist ideology at that time.³⁴ However, since the Chinese economic reform, which began in the 1980s, religious policies of the

³¹Yoshiko Ashiwa and David L. Wank, ‘Making Religion, Making the State in Modern China: An Introductory Essay’ in Yoshiko Ashiwa and David L. Wank (eds), *Making Religion, Making the State: The Politics of Religion in Modern China* (California: Stanford University Press, 2009), pp. 1–21.

³²Meyfair Mei-hui Yang, ‘Postcoloniality and Religiosity in Modern China: The Disenchantments of Sovereignty’, *Theory, Culture & Society* 28:2 (2011), pp. 3–45; Meyfair Mei-hui Yang, ‘Introduction’, in Meyfair Mei-hui Yang (ed) *Chinese Religiosities Afflictions of Modernity and State Formation*, (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 2008), pp. 1–40. See also Ya-pei Kuo, ‘Zongjiao and the Category of Religion in China’ in Richard King (ed) *Religion, Theory, Critique: Classic and Contemporary Approaches and Methodologies*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), pp. 155–161; David U.B. Liu, ‘The Ancestral, the Religiopolitical’ in *Religion as a Category of Governance and Sovereignty*, op. cit., pp. 143–181.

³³Mingming Wang, *The West as the Other: On the Genealogy and Significance of China’s ‘Occidentalism’* [西方作为他者：论中国‘西方学’的谱系与意义] (Beijing: World Book Publishing Co., 2007).

³⁴Holmes Welch, *Buddhism under Mao* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972); Jean-Pierre Charbonnier, *Christians in China: A.D. 600 to 2000* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007), pp. 425–443; Daniel H. Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China* (Chichester, West Sussex; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), pp. 158–182.

Chinese state have largely turned to classic secularism and seen the existence of religion as an integral part of the socialist history, at least in its early stage.³⁵ The extent to which the CCP has endorsed religious freedom is no less great, if not greater, than that of its Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) predecessor during the Republican era (1912–1949),³⁶ although this endorsement and its practice in reality must be grasped in both the legacy of the radical policies implemented during the revolutionary period,³⁷ as well as the complex social, economic and political contexts in which they are defined, explained, and concretized.

Therefore, the dualistic picture depicted by Western media regarding the condition of (lacking) religious freedom in China in contrast to the fully exertion of it in the West, while should not be considered as untrue, tells only part of the story. Chinese elite accepted the concepts of ‘religion’ (along with its opposition ‘secular’ and other aforementioned modern concepts and narratives) and ‘religious freedom’ from Western colonizers in the beginning of the 20th century, and since then have consistently institutionalized them in accordance with their specific political agenda in different historical eras (with the exception of the ten years during the Cultural Revolution). However, as emphasized more than once in this little piece of work, both ‘religion’ and ‘religious freedom’ are constructed by modern intellectual and political discourses not only for freeing and protecting but also disciplining and shaping. Once boundaries being set for ‘religious freedom’, this immediately points to the opposite of it, that is, its transgression and the consequent discipline and punishment. This applies to all countries, China included, that have accepted the separation of ‘religion’ from the ‘secular’ and ‘politics’, and institutionalized ‘religious freedom’. Meanwhile, every particular political project of ‘religious freedom’ is also worth being historicized and politicized in its own terms.

The neo-liberal propaganda around China’s ‘War on Religion’ (and the implied abundance of religious freedom in the West), while masking the true nature of ‘religious freedom’, manifests actually a form of postcolonial discourse. It does not only ignore, consciously or not, the postcolonial condition of today’s China, but is also trying to further this by creating a new form of Orientalism about China, in order to perpetuate the postcolonial world order in which the pre-colonists still dominate and to which a booming China has become a real challenger.³⁸ For that reason, a new comparison between a modern, advanced Occident and a pre-modern, backward (in terms of how religion is treated by the state in specific and the lack of human rights in general) Orient (China) is urgently needed.

³⁵Chinese Communist Party Central Committee, ‘Regarding the Basic Viewpoint and Policy on the Religious Question during Our Country’s Socialist Period [关于我国社会主义时期宗教问题的基本观点和基本政策], in *Collection of Important Documents since the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Party Congress* [十一届三中全会以来重要文献选读], v. 1. (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 1987 [1982]), pp. 428–448; Kim-kwong Chan and Eric R. Carlson, *Religious Freedom in China: Policy, Administration and Regulation; a Research Handbook* (Santa Barbara, CA, and Hong Kong: Institute for the Study of American Religion and Hong Kong Institute for Culture, Commerce and Religion, 2005).

³⁶Rebecca Nedostup, *Superstitious Regimes: Religion and the Politics of Chinese Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 2010.

³⁷André Laliberté, ‘Religious Philanthropy in China, Taiwan and Hong Kong: The Impact of State Institutional Trajectories’, *Asian Journal of Social Science*, 43:4 (2015), pp. 435–465.

³⁸Daniel Vukovich, *China and Orientalism: Western Knowledge Production and the P.R.C.* (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2012); Daniel Vukovich, *Illiberal China: The Ideological Challenge of the People’s Republic of China* (Singapore: Springer Singapore: Imprint: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

Here in this postcolonial discourse about China, ‘religion’, as it did more than one century ago as an integral part of the colonial discourses that Chinese elite accepted from the colonizers, plays a key role in the Western postcolonial agenda targeting China. Around the corner of the 20th century, ‘religion’ as a retrospectively new category, after being introduced to China, helped accelerate the retreat of Confucianism from the imperial politics for which it had functioned as the ideological, ritual, intellectual and legal foundations for over two millennia, and thus the abandonment of the Chinese imperial dynastic rule itself. This constituted a major step not merely in transforming China into a modern, secular nation-state, but also in integrating China into the global colonial system which was symbiotic with a rapidly growing global market. One hundred years later, ‘religion’ becomes a convenient tool to create and amplify ideological antagonism, in spite of the fact that this antagonism is far more about which nation-state or alliance of nation states can win the global economic competition than who will prevail morally and ideologically.

Compared to the Soviet Union during the Cold War, China’s social-economic institution today is far closer to its ‘Western Bloc’ rival and as an economy has far more deeply integrated itself into the global market and interaction. With regard to this, it is even more difficult for the West to other China than it did to the Soviet Union during the Cold War; the ‘religion’ issue, therefore, is detached and abstracted from the complicated social, political and economic context of China as a modern nation-state with its own agenda in the global geopolitics, and becomes a readily available, though essentially artificial, target for othering. This is certainly not something new in a post-colonial world. Before and during the ‘War on Terror’, the ‘religion’ issue, that is, Islam as an inherently violent ‘religious’ tradition that has always intervened into ‘politics’ improperly, has been an integral part of the neo-Orientalist narrative,³⁹ to justify the war and camouflage the root of ‘terrorist’ attacks in Western colonialism. The only difference between the ‘War on Terror’ and China’s ‘War on Religion’ is that the ‘villain’ in the former becomes the victim of ‘religious persecution’ in the latter. As in the case of neo-Orientalism, one of the key factors in deconstructing the Western discourse around ‘religion in China’ is to re-embed the identified ‘religion’ issue into the complex social, political and economic context from which it is abstracted, examining it in relation to the building of the nation-state in a post-colonial world order. An initial attempt will be made to address this in the next section before the conclusion.

Religion and the Chinese state building

Since the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976 and the beginning of the reform and opening policy in 1978, and especially the promulgation of ‘Document 19’ (titled ‘The Basic Viewpoint and Policy on the Religious Question during our Country’s Socialist Period’) by the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party in 1982, the Chinese state’s approach to religion has started its transition from an ideological one to a pragmatic one. However, this does not mean that the CCP has, either nominally

³⁹Christiana Spens, *The Portrayal and Punishment of Terrorists in Western Media* (Cham: Springer International Publishing AG, 2019); Uliano Conti, ‘The Day After. Considerations and Future Prospects for Studying the Phenomenon of Othering after Jihadist Terrorist Attacks’, *Italian Sociological Review*, 8:2 (2018), pp. 201–215.

or virtually, abandoned its atheist standpoint. On the contrary, this transition implies even a more consistent, though also more subtle, form of practice of Karl Marx's reductionist understanding of religion, in which the root of religion in the alienated form of socioeconomic relation and thus the prospectively long-standing existence of religion in society on the one hand, and its constantly interaction with other spheres of human enterprise, especially that of politics and economics, on the other, have been grasped by the CCP in a more thorough manner. This better sense of the inter-connectedness of religion to society as a whole has led to much less rigid policies to religion. It also reminds us that reducing the problem quickly to 'repressing religious freedom' on the basis of an atheist ideology is to accept an autonomous and isolable 'religious' sphere and obscure the complex social, economic and political negotiations and interactions between practices and institutions (not) recognized as 'religious' and the Chinese state.

In fact, no consistent strategy can be found to apply to all of the five officially recognized religions (Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Protestant Christianity and Catholicism) and other practices and institutions deemed non-secular in today's China, as the way they relate to the domestic and international political and socioeconomic reality, and thus to the agenda for Chinese state building, varies. Diversity can be easily identified in the ways in which the state deals with different traditions or even the same tradition in different circumstances. As Ashiwa and Wank correctly point out, the state-religion interaction in contemporary China should be understood as multiple political processes, which are not only embodied in antagonism and conflict, but also competition, adaptation, and cooperation.⁴⁰ However, it is this diversity or multiplicity that betrays the consistent principle behind the apparently inconsistent policies the CCP has made and implemented for institutionalizing religion, that is, making religion in alignment with the agenda for the Chinese state building.

Four factors are especially important for the CCP and governments at all levels to consider when setting their policies for a specific practice or institution: (1) China's economic development; (2) the Chinese nationalism; (3) the authority of the CCP; and (4) international relations and global competition. These factors, of course, interrelate to each other and in most cases more than one of them may play a role; their respective importance can be different in each case and also subject to change. Some examples will be discussed below to explain this further, although it is worth making three points before doing that. Firstly, these four factors are only what I see as currently the most prominent in the agenda for the Chinese state building and can by no means exhaust the considerations the CCP has when dealing with issues related to religion, neither are they not subject to alter in time when domestic and international environments change. Secondly, it is mistaken to assume that the government is the only agency in the politics of religion in today's China and 'religious' communities are merely passive recipients of policies unilaterally decided by former. More than often, the latter seeks to identify their potentially beneficial role in building a modern state or local societies and actively engages in various strategies to win legitimacy for their activities or even expand their 'religious' space, although the disparity of power between the two parties is obvious. Last but not the least, though still being governed

⁴⁰Yoshiko Ashiwa and David L. Wank, 'Making Religion, Making the State in Modern China: An Introductory Essay', in *Making Religion, Making the State: The Politics of Religion in Modern China*, op. cit., pp. 1–21, at p. 5.

by an authoritarian regime, both individuals and communities in post-Maoist China have enjoyed a much greater degree of autonomy than they did in the first three decades of the PRC. The governmental move for ‘religion’, therefore, includes not only positively supporting or repressing, but also relatively passive toleration or acquiescence, especially when dealing with movements at the grassroots level, as long as the they are not overtly detrimental to social life and state building.

Since the CCP initiated the economic reform moving toward a market economic system, economic development has always enjoyed high priority in the CCP’s agenda for the Chinese state building. This developmentalism, as some may correctly assume, also relates closely to the superiority of socialism and the authority of the CCP (factor 2) as the latter has staked much of its political legitimacy upon its ability to provide continuous improvement of the living standard for Chinese people. For this reason, ‘religious economy’ has most often been an element that interests the state, especially local governments. This is especially the case for the revival of Buddhism and Daoism, and their temple restoration since 1990s.⁴¹ On the one hand, these temples as both religious and cultural sites, especially those with a long history or having links to famous religious figures, are frequently seen by local governments as economic resources for local tourist industry. As Ji comments, the Buddhist ‘practice of participating in commercial and service sector activities has developed in parallel with the reconstruction of the market economy’.⁴² These activities include collecting temple entrance fee, selling religious souvenirs, running vegetarian restaurants, and even providing divination services, etc.⁴³ On the other hand, for those temples which have a large network with oversea Chinese, they are also placed great expectations to attract oversea investment, as in the case of *Nanputuosi*, a Buddhist temple in Xiamen city.⁴⁴ Another ‘tradition’ which has exploited greatly this connection between cultural capital and symbolic power on the one hand and socio-economic development on the other for its space to exist is Chinese popular religion (民间宗教),⁴⁵ about which more will be said below.

Beyond both aspects, ‘religious’ institutions, including Buddhism, Daoism and various Christian denominations, have been encouraged by the Chinese state since 1990s to involve themselves in the provision of social services in domains of education, public health and social security.⁴⁶ This can be seen as indirect contribution to economic development as the above three domains of social policies can account for a considerable proportion in the governmental budget, and a complementary relation between the

⁴¹Kuei-min Chang, ‘Spiritual State, Material Temple: The Political Economy of Religious Revival in China’ (Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University), <http://ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/dissertations-theses/spiritual-state-material-temple-political-economy/docview/1849031160/se-2?accountid=10226> (accessed July 29, 2021).

⁴²Zhe Ji, ‘Buddhist Institutional Innovations’ in Vincent Goossaert, Jan Kiely, and John Lagerwey (eds) *Modern Chinese Religion II: 1850–2015* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2016), pp. 731–766, at p. 760.

⁴³In spite of the fact that the subject of the current monastic economy is not necessarily Buddhist or Daoist communities or temples themselves but may include local governments or/and private investors, sometimes with monks and nuns being merely their employees. See *ibid.*

⁴⁴Yoshiko Ashiwa, ‘Positioning Religion in Modernity: State and Buddhism in China’, in *Making Religion, Making the State: The Politics of Religion in Modern China*, *op. cit.*, pp. 43–73, at pp. 60–67.

⁴⁵Lizhu Fan and Na Chen, ‘The Revival and Development of Popular Religion in China, 1980–Present’, in *Modern Chinese Religion II: 1850–2015*, *op. cit.*, pp. 923–948; Lan Li, *Popular Religion in China: The New Role of Nuo* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 181–216.

⁴⁶André Laliberté, ‘Buddhist Charities and China’s Social Policy: An Opportunity for Alternate Civility?’ *Archives de sciences sociales des religions*, 57: 158 (2012), pp. 95–117.

state and ‘religious’ institutions in these domains can undoubtedly allow the former to invest more of its resources to other areas and industries of social economy. However, as Laliberté notes, while accumulating respect and appreciation among population by taking social responsibilities, Buddhist institutions have been cautious not to claim political capital from this so that they would not be considered as potential competitors of the CCP for authority, a form of self-monitoring that ‘religion’ in China has been consciously implementing for survival.⁴⁷ Thus, the factor of the CCP’s authority is also involved here, though in an implicit and indirect manner, providing us the first example of the interconnectedness between the aforementioned factors. But before looking into it more carefully, let us focus on the Chinese nationalism.

China started its transition from a *tianxia* (天下, all under heaven) ‘empire’ to a nation-state in the second half of the 19th century, when its last imperial dynasty, Qing, was suffering in deep crisis brought about by both Western colonialism and internal social, economic and political problem coming in waves. The signing of a series of formally equal treaties with Western nation-states as a new kind of international relations of recognition, while granting Qing formal equality and sovereignty under European international law, facilitated its acceptance of the concept of the sovereign state and of the nation-state possessing a unified sovereign authority, in contrast to its declining multiple centres (structures) of power, unboundedness, and the tributary system.⁴⁸ Although the aforementioned transition was carried on by both the Republic of China during 1912–1949 and the PRC after 1949, and the trend toward centralization of power deepened, both also inherited roughly the same territory from the Qing empire, as well as its multi-ethnic makeup and cultural diversity. One of the biggest challenges facing both regimes, therefore, has been making compatible this multiplicity and diversity with the united sovereignty of the nation-state, one which has also been intensified by the ethnogenesis made possible by the introduction to China of modern nationalism. While both Chiang Kai-shek and the CCP identify the subject of the Chinese nation-state as *Zhonghua minzu* (中华民族 the Chinese nation) which consists of Han majority and minority ethnic groups, the former adopted an assimilationist approach, seeing the differences between the supposedly distinct groups as merely cultural and arguing for a ‘single-race republic’ or a *guozu* (国族 nation-race); the latter, in contrast, underwent a strategic change from unconditionally recognizing the right of national minorities to self-determination (自决, *zijue*) or self-rule (自主, *zizhu*) to approving merely their right to autonomy (自治, *zizhi*), with the latter being eventually embodied in the system of ‘regional autonomy’ that is still operating in the PRC today.⁴⁹

With a project called ‘Ethnic Classification’ that had been taken for almost three decades (interrupted by the Cultural Revolution) since 1950s, China now officially recognizes fifty-six ethnonational groups or *minzu* (民族, the Chinese translation of both

⁴⁷Ibid, pp. 96, 113.

⁴⁸Hui Wang, *China from Empire to Nation-State*, translated by Michael Gibbs Hill (Cambridge; London: Harvard University Press, 2014), pp. 124–132.

⁴⁹Dru C. Gladney, *Muslim Chinese: Ethnic Nationalism in the People’s Republic* (Cambridge, Mass.: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University; distributed by Harvard University Press, 1991), pp. 79–92; Thomas S. Mullaney, *Coming to Terms with the Nation: Ethnic Classification in Modern China* (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 2011), pp. 1–5; Ke Wang, *From ‘Tianxia’ to Nation-State* [从“天下”国家到民族国家] (Shanghai: Shanghai Renmin Chubanshe, 2019), chapters 9 & 10.

‘nationality’ and ‘ethnicity’), among which fifty-five are minority nationalities. In this way, the People’s Republic identifies itself as a ‘united multi-*minzu*’ nation with Han *minzu* and minority *minzu* together constituting the great *Zhonghua minzu*. Both this recognition of the ethnonational diversity and the ideologically promoted Chinese nation identity, as well as the tension between them, have greatly influenced the different ways the Chinese state deal with different religions.

The aforementioned ‘Ethnic Classification Project’ eventually led to the creation or recognition of 10 Muslim nationalities in China. Along with language, ‘religion’ (Islam) is the other essential unifying category for each of these nationalities and thus constitutes an integral part of their ethnonational identity, with the exception of *Hui*, for whom Islam is even the only unifying category of identity. Retrospectively, this seems not an unsurprising strategy, considering simultaneously the CCP’s acceptance of the separation of religion from politics, its atheist ideology, and its promise of respecting the cultural diversity among minorities and granting them autonomy. This is even more extraordinary if we consider the facts that there is striking diversity in terms of geographical distribution, language and socio-economic condition among *Hui* population, and that except for Tibetan Buddhism, no any other officially recognized religion than Islam relates so closely to a state-sanctified category (*minzu*) other than ‘religion’ that, as will be illustrated below, in some, though limited, occasions *zongjiao* (宗教, the Chinese term for ‘religion’) and *minzu* are inter-changeable terms when dealing with issues related to Muslim nationalities.

All of this means that in the PRC, issues related to Islam can never been addressed as purely ‘religious’ ones, as they are always inseparable with issues such as solidarity and unity of nationalities, border security, and the construction of Chinese nationalism. Islamic practices could be dealt with favourably or even encouraged, and privileges given to Muslims, when doing so can promote unity of nationalities and the authority of the CCP. Preferential policies have been enacted in areas such as university admissions, urban residence, and exemption from the once-child policy; tens of thousands of Hajj pilgrims have been sponsored by the state.⁵⁰ It is worth noting that most of these policies are implemented in the name of *minzu* rather than ‘religion’, even though some of them relate directly to Islamic practices. For example, in cities, burial in the ground is only allowed among the 10 Muslim minorities for ‘respecting the funeral customs of minority nationalities’;⁵¹ *qing zhen shitang* (清真食堂, Muslim dining halls) set up in public universities providing food prepared according to Islamic dietary prescriptions are also apparently for ‘respecting the dietary customs of minority nationalities’. More than that, as Dru C. Gladney has eloquently pointed out, this ambiguity between *minzu* and religion was also actively exploited by local Muslims, especially *Hui*, as a practice of ethnopolitics, in order to take the state-imposed discourse about nationality and religion to their own advantage.⁵²

On the other hand, when Islam appears in the eyes of CCP as a factor which promotes ethnonational identity to an extent that it may endanger the unity of Chinese nation,

⁵⁰Thomas David DuBois, ‘Religion and the Chinese State: Three Crises and a Solution’, *op. cit.*, p. 351.

⁵¹State Council of the People’s Republic of China, *Regulations on Funeral and Interment Control* (2012 revised version) [殡葬管理条例 2012 年修订本], <http://www.mca.gov.cn/article/gk/fg/shsw/201507/20150715849122.shtml> (accessed 03 August 2021).

⁵²Dru C. Gladney, *Muslim Chinese: Ethnic Nationalism in the People’s Republic*, *op. cit.*, pp. 5–6, 219–224, 225–260.

restrictive or even repressive policies can certainly rise as responses, as seen in the case of Uyghur Muslims. Uyghur as a united nationality itself is a modern product, and this identity consciousness has been strengthened by a series complex political and socio-economic interactions between the Chinese state and Uyghur communities since the establishment of the PRC.⁵³ From the last decade of the 20th century to today, Uyghur nationalism as well as violent incidents related to the former saw a sharp rise. While to what extent Islamic radicalism has been involved in the cause is a controversial question,⁵⁴ what cannot be denied is the parallel between the rise of Uyghur nationalism and the Islamic revival in Xinjiang, and the increasing salience of the latter in the Uyghur identify.⁵⁵ Some human rights activists, such as Nicholas Becquelin, maintain that Islam is actually less a source than a vehicle for expression of Uyghur nationalism,⁵⁶ although most scholars acknowledge the interplay between them, among whom Michael Clark even suggest that we are seeing a shift among at least some Uyghur nationalists from ‘ethnic religious nationalism’ to ‘ideological religious nationalism’, the latter of which sees the Islamic ideas as the basis for nationalism.⁵⁷ Considering also the lasting influence of highly political Naqshbandi Sufism in southern Xinjiang (where we witnessed even more violent incidents than in the North during the past decades) and the role in reinforcing nationalist movements played by contemporary political Islam in countries that have a large number of Muslim populations, it is not surprising that the CCP discriminates Islam practiced by Uyghur Muslims from that of other Muslim minorities and sees it as a potential or realistic threatening factor to the unity of Chinese nation, imposing on it much more restrictive regulations. It is worth noting that Chinese nationalism is not the only factor the CCP needs to consider when deciding its approach to Uyghur Muslims in specific and all Chinese Muslims in general. Both Gladney and Clark have acutely identified the role that economic development and international relations have played, or even the dilemmas they have made, in the CCP’s approach to Uyghur Muslims, as both China’s growing demands on energy and its need for Middle East countries as a balancing force to the United States have made the Chinese authority in a position that whatever policies they adopt for Islam, it must consider the attitude of the wider Muslim world and the possible responses it may make to them.⁵⁸

Other than relating closely to Muslim minorities and Islam, the self-defined united multi-nationalities as a whole as the ‘Chinese nation’ has significant implications to some other traditions. Daoism, for example, as a modern category emerged in China’s

⁵³Michael Dillon, *Xinjiang in the Twenty-First Century: Islam, Ethnicity and Resistance* (London: Routledge, 2018); Michael Dillon, *Xinjiang: China’s Muslim Far North-West* (London: Routledge, 2014).

⁵⁴Some studies in this area include Kilic Bugra Kanat, ‘“War on Terror” as a Diversionary Strategy: Personifying Minorities as Terrorists in the People’s Republic of China’, *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 32 (2012), pp. 507–527; Ana Bracic and Amanda Murdie, ‘Human Rights Abused? Terrorist Labeling and Individual Reactions to Call to Action’, *Political Research Quarterly*, 73:4 (2020), pp. 878–892; Sheena Chestnut Greitens, Myunghee Lee, and Emir Yazici, ‘Counterterrorism and Preventive Repression: China’s Changing Strategy in Xinjiang’, *International Security*, 44:3 (2020), pp. 9–47; Kendrick T. Kuo, ‘Revisiting the Salafi-jihadist Threat in Xinjiang’, *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 32:4 (2012), pp. 528–544.

⁵⁵Colin Mackerras, ‘Religion and the Uyghurs: A Contemporary Overview’, in Güljanat Kurmangaliyeva and Ercilasun Konuralp Ercilasun (eds) *The Uyghur Community: Diaspora, Identity and Geopolitics* (Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2018), pp. 59–84.

⁵⁶Nicholas Becquelin, ‘Xinjiang in the Nineties’, *The China Journal*, 44 (2000), pp. 65–90, at p. 89.

⁵⁷Michael Clark, ‘China and the Uyghurs: The “Palestinization” of Xinjiang’, *Middle East Policy*, 22:3 (2015), pp. 127–146, at p. 134.

⁵⁸Dru C. Gladney, ‘Islam in China: State Policing and Identity Politics’, in *Making Religion, Making the State: The Politics of Religion in Modern China*, op. cit., pp. 151–178, at p. 170; Michael Clark, ‘China and the Uyghurs: The “Palestinization” of Xinjiang’, op. cit., p. 141.

encounter with the West in early 20th century, is being made increasingly an integral part of the Chinese national identity in the contemporary PRC. Through a textual analysis of the *Daoist Textbook of Patriotism* (*Daojiao Aiguo Zhuyi Jiaocheng* 道教爱国主义教程), a text produced by the Chinese Daoist Association and published in 2011 that can to a great extent represent the official expectation to Daoism, Shu-wei Hsieh identifies the attempts made by both the state and the Daoist elite to integrate Daoism into an officially recognized narrative of the Chinese nation and Chinese civilization.⁵⁹ In this textbook, Daoism is not only connected to the Yellow Emperor (*Huang Di* 黄帝), the purported ancestor of the Chinese nation, and to historical figures who are considered as having made great contributions to it, but also to some extent reduced to a series cultural resources that belong to the spiritual heritage of the Chinese nation. In this way, Daoism is shaping itself into a national religion, in order to establish its legitimacy in alignment with the CCP's agenda for state-building.

A similar, though more illuminating, example is Chinese popular religion. As mentioned above, it owes its revival in post-Maoist China partly to its contribution to local socio-economic development, as in the case of Buddhism. Meanwhile, it has also exploited the official narrative about the renaissance of traditional culture as an integral part of the Chinese national identity. However, an extra difficulty has always accompanied Chinese popular religion, being that it is not one of the five officially recognized religions and the constant doubt casted on it about its capability in differentiating itself from superstitions. The problem here, therefore, lies in not only the relationship of its practice to the Chinese state building, but also the legitimacy of category. According to Lan Li and Fan and Chen, several categorical strategies have been adopted by both the government and the practitioners of Chinese popular religion to provide it space for existence. Instead of adding the wide range of institutions and practices under the umbrella of Chinese popular religion to the list of officially recognized religions (which is impossible in itself given the incredible variety among these institutions and practices), existing categories, being it religious or secular, have been exploited. Those secular ones include 'local culture', 'custom', 'folk art', or even Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) at a national level. On the other side, due to the usually blurred and fluid boundaries, and even overlap, between Chinese popular religion, Buddhism, and Daoism in history, along with the revival of the latter two as institutional religions, the former has won some space for itself by putting deities from both in its temples.⁶⁰

Another tradition which, too, owes it contemporary revival partly to the Chinese nationalism though still needs to negotiate the problem of category is Confucianism. While it is true that Confucian philosophical thoughts have been frequently present in the PRC's political rhetoric in recent years, such as Hu Jintao's idea of 'harmonious society' and Xi Jinping's speech,⁶¹ to what extent this implies an ideological reconfiguration of the country to 'communist New Confucian Nationalism', as suggested by Bart

⁵⁹Shu-wei Hsieh, 'Daoism and Nationalism in Modern and Contemporary China' in Cheng-tian Kuo (ed) *Religion and Nationalism in Chinese Societies* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017), pp. 253–278.

⁶⁰Lan Li, *Popular Religion in China: The New Role of Nuo*, op. cit., pp. 2–3, 170–179; Lizhu Fan and Na Chen, 'The Revival and Development of Popular Religion in China, 1980-Present', in *Modern Chinese Religion II: 1850-2015*, op. cit., pp. 923–948, at pp. 932–936.

⁶¹Jinping Xi, *President Xi Jinping's Speech at Qufu Confucian Institute 2014* [习近平主席到曲阜孔子入学研究员参观并演讲 2014], <http://www.hytex.com/info/361.html> (accessed 05 August 2021).

Dessein,⁶² remains an open question. What cannot be denied, however, is the Confucian revival in mainland China since the new century in different realms including education, religiosity, and even politics, as both civil and official practice, even though part of it is merely symbolic exploitation of the tradition. This revival, and the toleration, and sometimes encouragement, of it by governments at all levels, as in the case of Chinese popular religion, is motivated partly by the construction of Chinese nationalism in which ‘Chinese traditional culture’ represented by Confucianism takes it core, and partly by its potential as ethical and political philosophy to promote social stability and political loyalty.⁶³ What is worth noting here includes again the categorical strategy adopted by the state when dealing with this Confucian revival. Confucianism has appeared in official narratives exclusively as culture (文化 *wenhua*), philosophy (哲学 *zhexue*), or thoughts (思想 *sixiang*), instead of the Confucian religion (儒教 *rujiao*), even though a significant portion of the various forms of the revival has been embodied in that of Confucian rituals, and some activists, such as Beichen Zhou, even seeks to promote Confucianism to the status of the national religion.⁶⁴

The authority of the CCP is a factor that the Chinese state always needs to consider in dealing with every practice or institution that may be considered as ‘religious’, although among the five officially recognized religions, it pertains most to the two Christian traditions, Protestantism and Catholicism. Since China started its process of modernization, Christianity, especially Protestantism, had enjoyed a short ‘golden age’ during the first two decades of the 20th century, an era of not only great growth but also high prestige, due to the initiation of a national reform programme among whose supporters Christianity had been seen as the spiritual source of the more advanced Western civilization and thus a positive factor which could help modernize China.⁶⁵ However, since mid-1920s, the changed intellectual and political ethos among many Chinese elite had facilitated a backlash against Christianity, especially among young urban students. Several interlocking and interacting factors had contributed to the emergence of this anti-Christian movement. First and foremost was a more radical approach to ‘religion’, in its relation to both ‘science’ and ‘superstitious’, prepared by the New Culture Movement that began in 1915 and rationalism it was imbued. This approach to some extent dissolved the boundaries between ‘religion’ and ‘superstitious’, seeing both as incompatible with ‘science’ and thus with the modernization of China. Two other closely interrelated factors that also boosted this anti-Christianity were nationalism and anti-imperialism, with the former viewing Christianity as an obstacle in the way of constructing the Chinese self-respect and a distinct cultural identity of China, and with the latter, by resorting to the recently introduced Marxism-Leninism, seeing Christianity as a convenient tool used by Western imperialist and capitalist countries to dominate China economically and politically.⁶⁶

⁶²Bart Dessein, ‘Religion and the Nation: Confucian and New Confucian Religious Nationalism’ in *Religion and Nationalism in Chinese Societies*, op. cit., pp. 199–231, at pp. 217–223.

⁶³Thomas David DuBois, ‘Religion and the Chinese State: Three Crises and a Solution’, op. cit., pp. 344–358, at pp. 354–356.

⁶⁴Beichen Zhou, *Institutes of the Confucian Religion* [儒教要义] (Hong Kong: China International Culture Press, 2009).

⁶⁵Daniel H. Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China* (Chichester, West Sussex; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), pp. 92–120; Daniel H. Bays, ‘Protestantism and Modern China: Rejection, Success, Disaster, Survival, and Rebirth’ in *Modern Chinese Religion II: 1850–2015*, op. cit., 867–883, at pp. 874–875.

⁶⁶Tatsuro Yamamoto and Sumiko Yamamoto, ‘The Anti-Christian Movement in China, 1922–1927’, *The Far Eastern Quarterly*, 12:2 (1953), pp. 133–147; Ka-che Yip, *Religion, Nationalism, and Chinese Students* (Washington: Western Washington University, 1980), pp. 15–30.

All of the above factors, though especially the latter two, have always lain in the centre of the CCP's persistent suspicion of Christianity. The Western, and thus imperialist origin of this tradition, as well as both its potential and realistic connections to the neo-liberal democratic world, have incurred a series of restrictive regulations upon Christian communities in China. On the Protestant side, things have been further complicated by the existence of a large number of unregistered churches, or 'house' churches, in China. Their posture of refusal to be incorporated into the official Three Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) and acceptance of only God and the Bible as the ultimate source of reference have been seen by the CCP as a challenge to its authority.⁶⁷ On the other hand, the universalism contained in Christian faith has also contributed to a form of hesitation, if not refusal, among Chinese Protestants to accept the relatively narrow-minded nationalist narrative promoted by the CCP.⁶⁸ As for Chinese Catholicism, the tension between the Chinese Catholic community, especially those 'underground' churches (the Catholic counterpart of 'house' churches), and the CCP has its root in the ecclesiastical structure of the Roman Catholic church and the latter's constant hostility toward Marxism and the Chinese communist regime,⁶⁹ both of which imply the potential for Chinese Catholics recognizing two authorities—the Pope and Vatican on the one side, and the CCP on the other—or even merely the former. This, again, also points to incompatibility with Chinese nationalism.

Negotiating, or even manipulating, categories is also included in the strategies the Chinese state has skilfully employed, though usually in a negative way, when the authority of the CCP is challenged, especially when dealing with practices and institutions that are not on the list of the officially recognized religions. The most famous example is Falun Gong, generally considered as a *qigong* (气功 life energy cultivation), a distinctive modern Chinese category which had acquired its legitimacy in communist China through exploiting the category of science and nationalism,⁷⁰ before it was banned by the government in 1999. What is worth noting here is that when repressing Falun Gong, the state did not only degrade it into 'superstition', a categorical strategy it had more than often employed when restricting certain popular 'religious' practices, but actually criminalized both the practice and its organization. As in the cases of criminalizing 'religion' in other parts of the world, e.g. Obeah in Jamaica,⁷¹ this form of categorization combined with institutionalization implies a deep concern from the establishment regarding its authority and possible undermining of it. Falun Gong, on the other hand, has actively resorted to the category of 'religion', by accusing the Chinese government of destroying 'religious freedom', as a resistant strategy, although it had rarely so self-identified until its being outlawed.⁷² Along with its criminalization, the CCP also

⁶⁷Yen-zen Tsai, "'We Are Good Citizens': Tension between Protestants and the State in Contemporary China' in *Religion and Nationalism in Chinese Societies*, op. cit., pp. 309–338.

⁶⁸Ibid; Phil Entwistle, 'Faith in China: Religious Belief and National Narratives among Young, Urban Chinese Protestants', *Nations and Nationalism*, 22:2 (2016), pp. 347–370.

⁶⁹Daniel H. Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China*, op. cit., pp. 169–175, pp. 192–193; Jean-Pierre Charbonnier, *Christians in China: A.D. 600 to 2000*, op. cit., pp. 430–443, pp. 515–530.

⁷⁰Utiraruto Otehode, 'The Creation and Reemergence of Qigong in China' in *Making Religion, Making the State: The Politics of Religion in Modern China*, op. cit., pp. 241–265; David Palmer, *Qigong Fever: Body, Science, and Utopia in China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

⁷¹Diana Paton, *The Cultural Politics of Obeah: Religion, Colonialism and Modernity in the Caribbean World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

⁷²Thomas David DuBois, 'Religion and the Chinese State: Three Crises and a Solution', op. cit., p. 346.

pronounced Falun Gong a *xiejiao* (邪教 heterodox or evil cult), a category that had been employed too by the Chinese imperial state to differentiate illegitimate traditions considered as serious threats to public order from the legitimate ones, although back then *jiao* meant merely ‘teaching’, which differentiated no ‘religious’ from the ‘secular’. This form of categorization by the CCP today, therefore, implies both a continuation of the imperial policy in dealing with spiritual traditions with politically subversive implications,⁷³ and an innovative use of the same label in its relation to ‘religion’ as a modern category.

The case of Falun Gong, along with aforementioned Chinese popular religion and Confucianism, testify again to the constructed nature of ‘religious freedom’ and even ‘religious policies’, as the category ‘religion’ itself is in the hand of modern governance in the first place. The modern state can decide, to a great extent, whether a practice or institution is religious in the first place and, if not, what it is, according to its specific agenda, before even addressing ‘religion’. Ironically but not surprisingly, this strategy of categorization has also been exploited, though in a reversed way, by Western media reports and even scholarly discussions that sympathize Falun Gong (or any other analogous movements in China) and disagree with the CCP’s suppressive campaign against it. In his *Falun Gong and the Future of China*, David Ownby, for example, argues a religious nature and accordingly the right of religious freedom for Falun Gong as if ‘religion’ is simply out there as an autonomous and isolable entity, an approach of which we have provided elaborate criticism above.⁷⁴ What my analysis denies here, therefore, is not the factuality of the aforementioned suppressive campaign, nor does it maintain that Falun Gong should not be classified into religion, on the basis of a different definition of the latter. It is always ‘religion’ as such as a legitimate category and the various forms of exploitation of it that this discussion so far has engaged to deconstruct and go beyond, by identifying their connections to different political agendas.

Conclusion

By pointing out the post-colonial condition of the People’s Republic of China and the fact that its institution is built, like most western countries, upon one of the most fundamental modern categorical differentiation between ‘religion’ and the ‘secular’ and thus upon the paradoxical recognition of ‘religious freedom’, the discussion above tries to, on the one hand, deconstruct the ideologically constructed contrast between China and the Western world regarding their approaches to ‘religious freedom’, and depict roughly the picture of Chinese politics of ‘religion’ in relation to the particular Chinese agenda for state building on the other.

While André Laliberté describes the CCP’s approach to religion as ‘politicization of religion’,⁷⁵ I would rather, by resorting to the critical framework provided by Fitzgerald, Asad, and Stack etc., consider the modern category of ‘religion’ itself in its separation from the ‘secular’ as already an outcome of modern politics and thus everything involved in modern governance dealing with religion is universally and essentially politicized. In

⁷³Anthony C. Yu, *State and Religion in China: Historical and Textual Perspectives* (Chicago, Ill.: Open Court, 2005).

⁷⁴David Ownby, *Falun Gong and the Future of China* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 3–22.

⁷⁵André Laliberté, ‘The politicization of Religion by the CCP: A Selective Retrieval’, *Schweizerische Gesellschaft für Asienkunde. Asiatische Studien*, 69:1 (2015), pp. 185–211.

that sense, ‘politicization of religion’ is merely a tautology and points to nothing unique with the politics of religion in the PRC, although the latter indeed has particular considerations for religion in terms of its cultural, political, socioeconomic, and diplomatic contexts.

The above analysis of the CCP’s strategic interaction with ‘religion’ in relation to the four factors currently essential for realizing its agenda for state building, therefore, can help demythicise both the existence of distinct and universal ‘religious freedom’, as if its boundaries are self-evident and its demarcation needs no involvement of modern governance, and the neo-liberal thesis that ‘China is repressing religion’. The conclusion of this article is neither approval of this thesis nor of its anti-thesis. Rather, it claims that nothing in the CCP’s dealing with religion is merely for religion’s sake, as there is no way for modern politics to leave religion, however it is defined, in real autonomy due to the falsity of the idea of religion being an autonomous sphere of human enterprise. It is not possible at all to separate ‘religious’ practices and institutions altogether from other realms of the society. For this reason, religion must be constantly moulding in its interactions with those other realms, in order that it is not confused with modern politics and, at the same time, provides the spiritual and even material resources the latter needs, or not becomes the hinderance of it. It is these dynamic, multiple forms of negotiation between modern secular politics and its ‘heterodoxies’ that define the politics of religion in China, or any other country that claims its secularity.

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